

Cypripedium for every garden

PHILLIP CRIBB and CLARE HERMANS explain how Dutch nursery Anthura has increased the availability of hardy slipper orchids, and the latter outlines how he grows them in his garden



Clumps of *Cypripedium* thrive in a shady border at Anthura

VISITORS TO orchid shows, and even the RHS Chelsea Flower Show this year and last, will have noticed a sharp increase in the number of *Cypripedium* orchids on display. Large, well-grown plants in full flower have graced many Gold medal-winning stands. Until

recently, these orchids, many of which are threatened in the wild, were considered to be difficult subjects to grow, temperamental at best and a good way of wasting your money. However, this has all changed. *Cypripedium* plants, especially the hybrids, turn out to

be easy-to-grow and, in suitable conditions in the garden, clumps will double in size each year. Much of the credit for this must go to the Dutch nursery Anthura. It is the source of the majority of the plants seen recently at orchid shows, alpine plant shows and at Chelsea. ▶



Above Camiel de Jong with rows of *Cypripedium kentuckiense* hybrids coming into flower - a sight that could only have been imagined a few years ago

Below Benches packed with pots of *Cypripedium* Kentucky Pink. The vigorous plants are in their second year and are already in full flower



Anthura is a large nursery that shows off the best of Dutch horticultural technique and production. We have visited several times, including Phillip in May with Christopher (Kit) Grey-Wilson, Chair of the RHS Joint Rock Garden Plant Committee, and Clare in June on the RHS Orchid Committee's study tour (see p211-214). Anthura is based in Bleiswijk, a village between Delft and Rotterdam. Established in the 1970s, the nursery initially developed new lines of *Anthurium*, a passion of the founder and owner Nic van der Knaap. He converted his father's old tomato and salad glasshouses to grow these interesting pot plants, which are members of the *Arum* family.

Following the purchase of a German nursery that specialised in *Phalaenopsis* in 1995, Anthura diversified into tropical orchids. In 2005 the arrival of Camiel de Jong, an enthusiastic and gifted breeder who had just finished university, sparked a new and exciting phase for the nursery with the development of lines of hardy orchids for the garden.

Large scale breeding success

As a student Camiel had developed methods for *in vitro* propagation of *Cypripedium*. He also concocted reliable composts to ensure a high success rate for the transfer of protocorms from flasks to pot-culture. Using these methods, a wide range of species and a growing number of hybrids have been grown to flowering with consistently high success rates. Over the past three or four years vigorous plants have been made available commercially. Growers accustomed to buying a *Cypripedium* with one or two growths can now buy plants with several growths, and at a price that would have been considered unbelievably low only a couple of years ago.

The sheer scale of the operation

The rate of growth from flask to flowering is truly phenomenal

at Bleiswijk is amazing. Flowering *Cypripedium* plants occupy about 2.2 hectares (almost 5½ acres) of glasshouse. The species and hybrids are laid out in sections on the floor or on benches, 10 plants wide and 100 or so long. In full flower, as they were when we visited in late May this year and shortly afterwards as part of a delegation from the RHS Orchid Committee, they form blocks of colour from one end of the glasshouse to the other - an impressive sight.

We had always thought that the Eurasian *Cypripedium calceolus*, our native lady's slipper orchid, was tricky to grow. Here we saw hundreds of plants in full flower, each plant with six to twelve flowering shoots. Rarities such as the spotted-leaved Chinese species, *Cypripedium lichiangense* and *C. fargesii*, were flowering from seed in four or five years.

The rate of growth from flask of some species, such as *C. parviflorum* and some of the hybrids, is truly phenomenal. We were shown benches of seedlings, one year out of flask, with some plants already bearing flowers. The books nearly all give several years to first flowering of plants in the wild. Anthura has turned such perceptions on their head.

Anthura's garden

The ultimate test for garden worthiness is outdoors in a garden setting. Not far from the glasshouses a number of cultivars were planted in an attractive, domestic-style garden. Plants were tucked away under the foliage of acers, azaleas and conifers, and growing together with heucheras,



Cypripedium tibeticum in the garden at Anthura



Cypripedium kentuckiense hybrid

ferns and blue-flowered *Corydalis*. Large, flowering clumps of *Cypripedium kentuckiense* hybrids, pink-and-white species *C. reginae*, deep-red *C. tibeticum*, and spotted-leaved *C. lichiangense* were in full bloom, having all survived the three previous winters. In this attractive trial garden a few other

interesting orchids were secreted away, including some nice *Calanthe* and even a few *Pleione* plants.

In Phillip's garden

For several years I have successfully grown *Cypripedium* plants in my borders at home. They are from the



Cypripedium Ulla Silkens in the Anthura garden

David Ridgeway



The spotted-leaved *Cypripedium lichiangense* in Anthura's garden

range Anthura is marketing through selected UK nurseries. It includes several species, notably *C. macranthos* and *C. parviflorum* and their varieties, *C. kentuckiense*, and hybrids involving these species and *C. calceolus*, *C. fasciolatum*, *C. montanum* and *C. tibeticum*. I followed the instructions to plant them in garden soil mixed with horticultural grit, and either Seramis, or a top-quality cat litter based on porous clay particles, such as Sophisticat. All of them have thrived in the garden where they are shaded by ferns and small trees, notably a loquat *Eriobotrya japonica*, a dogwood *Cornus*, and a mountain ash *Sorbus aucuparia*. This year the most prolific slipper orchid,

a *C. montanum* hybrid, bore 27 flowers on a dozen shoots.

Anthura has revolutionized our appreciation of *Cypripedium* as garden plants. A peek behind the scenes suggests that they are also developing vigorous, garden-worthy lines in other orchid genera, such as *Bletilla*, *Calanthe*, *Dactylorhiza*, *Epipactis* and *Pleione*. *Cypripedium* plants may be the orchids of the moment but watch this space for further developments. ■

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Phillip Cribb



Cypripedium formosanum in Phillip's Surrey garden

ANTHURA'S POTTED HISTORY

- In 1972 Nic van der Knaap took over the family business and began the transition from salad veg to *Antburium*.
- Nic van der Knapp founded Anthuriumselecties in 1974. The name changed to Anthura when a company in Germany was bought, bringing a good selection of *Antburium* and *Phalaenopsis* pot plants to the business.
- The company is now a major player in the production of *Phalaenopsis* for the pot plant and cut-flower trade, listing 200 hybrids for sale.
- The main glasshouse has a 5km perimeter, with a second glasshouse built inside. The outer glasshouse is curved and styled on Kew's Palm House and Paxton's Crystal Palace, complete with corner glass finials.
- The staff use bicycles to get around such a large area of glasshouse.
- Anthura's hardy *Cypripedium* are marketed under the Garden Orchid brand and sold wholesale to the garden centre trade throughout Europe.
- The company markets 100 *Antburium* cultivars, most destined for export. It has additional production facilities in Germany and China.
- Today Anthura accounts for 80 percent of the world production of *Antburium* – developing, propagating and selling these pot plants to the mass market.

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

Learn more about growing hardy slipper orchids with Frosch & Cribb's book *Hardy Cypripedium, Species, Hybrids and Cultivation* (2012, Kew Publishing); and the websites of Anthura www.anthura.nl and Werner Frosch www.w-frosch.de/sprache.html